Benelux Summit Joint Declaration 2015

A Benelux Action Plan for jobs and growth

As Prime Ministers of Belgium, Luxemburg and the Netherlands, we want to lead the way in improving cross border cooperation and serve as an inspiring example for a European wide approach. We see Benelux cooperation as an effective tool to create jobs and stimulate growth in our countries through efficient cooperation and better integration, notably in the context of the Commission Action Plan for the Investment Strategy in Europe. We should seize the momentum of the successive Presidencies of the Council of the EU by Luxemburg and the Netherlands in the second half of 2015 and the first half of 2016.

Strengthening the Benelux internal market creates an area of 28 million consumers, a significant domestic market for companies and in particular SME's, that is comparable to other large countries in Europe. While rules and regulations are largely convergent, too many cross-border challenges and practical obstacles remain. The removal of remaining barriers would contribute to achieve its full potential, creating tangible benefits for our citizens, workers – our region hosts 37% of all EU cross-border workers -, and companies, in particular SME's .

The better implementation of EU legislation and the removal of remaining barriers to cross-border activities could contribute to a stable and predictable regulatory framework supporting growth and jobs. In the same spirit, the Benelux supports the implementation of the European Commission's Regulatory Fitness and Performance programme (Refit), while preserving the integrity of the internal market, the protection of the consumer and the environment, and the social protection.

The Benelux will continue to embody the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality, addressing issues at the most appropriate level. Within the EU, the Benelux countries are uniquely equipped for this, as they have the privilege to be able to cooperate in an intensified way (art.350 TFEU), allowing them to function as an incubator for European integration. Where the European Union cannot act, or is not yet ready to act, the Benelux countries can deliver.

Strengthening the internal market to create high quality jobs and improving competitiveness especially for SME's is a priority for the Benelux Prime ministers. Unfair competition however will threaten the welfare state by causing unemployment and a decline in social policy. Therefore the Benelux countries reaffirm their commitment taken at the Benelux "Social Summit" held on February 13th 2014 in Brussels to strengthen their cooperation to reinforce existing rules and to establish high social and labour standards for all workers in Europe, and to initiate a number of specific actions to stimulate growth and quality jobs in the their countries.

We, the 3 Prime Ministers, agree on the following set of measures that relate to the improvement of the functioning of the market, to trade, as well as to the business climate.

Reducing the remaining obstacles for companies and consumers in the internal market for retail:

There is a wide variety of regulations in retail (EU, national and regional), which are particularly complex in cross-border situations. the Benelux countries are striving to:

- Draw up an inventory of the barriers and bottlenecks in retail regulations.
- In areas of common interest, examine how national regulations can be better brought into line via harmonisation.
- Promote a consistent implementation and a uniform interpretation of EU legislation.
- Establish where the national regulations go further than the EU legislation (goldplating).
- Jointly address the territorial supply constraints that distort the internal market for traders and consumers.
- Work together on the implementation of the Payment Services Directive, regarding fees for payment cards (MIF).
- Identify barriers to cross-border participation in public procurement and implement methods to ease access for companies, including SME's from across the border to public procurements procedures.
- Explore ways and means to extend the use and application of the principle of mutual recognition in order to stimulate cross-border activities and reduce administrative/regulatory burdens for companies.

Enabling e-commerce and the Digital Single Market:

E-commerce and other on line services face regulations that are not adapted to digital opportunities. The Benelux governments could improve the key elements of cross-border e-commerce, such as tax registration, licences, payment systems and trading- and delivery conditions. The Benelux countries are striving to:

- Adapt the current national regulations that are tailored to physical trade in such a way that they are digital proof, facilitate online trade and make the Benelux countries the ideal test market for new retail concepts.
- Increase consumer confidence in cross-border shopping and payment methods.
- Streamline sub-areas with regard to payment systems, taxes, delivery and labelling.
- Deal carefully with data protection and the privacy of citizens.
- Stimulate mobile internet in order to extend access to e-commerce.

Reducing requirements for cross border transport and waste management:
Cross border waste transportation is currently impeded by barriers in regulations and also by practical, infrastructural barriers, while improved waste management offers special advantages for resource saving, energy generation and the circular economy. The Benelux countries are striving to:

- Better cooperate in the area of cross-border management, processing and transport of waste and prevent market distortions.
- Agree on a solid/proper regulation of cross-border waste transport (illegal export, dumping, over- and under capacity for waste processing).
- Harmonise the implementation of EU legislation and apply a uniform interpretation of the concepts from Directive 2008/98/EC.

Better VAT coordination:
Prevailing regulations on cross-border VAT-issues are complex and detailed, and their implementation is demanding for entrepreneurs, while information for entrepreneurs on this subject must be improved, the Benelux countries are striving to:

- Achieve simplification, adequate provision of information and reduction of the administrative burden regarding VAT regulations.
- Explore under which condition the 'Mini One Stop Shop' platform could be further developed.
- Enhance tax neutrality in the cultural field by promoting and endorsing initiatives enabling a move towards technology neutral VAT rates in this sector.

Enhancing cross-border provision of information:
The lack of accurate information poses the most serious underlying obstacle for entrepreneurs involved in cross-border trade and services, the Benelux countries are striving to:

- Draw up an inventory of the most important information for entrepreneurs on both sides of the border and look for possible improvement of the single point of contact system, in consultation with the social partners and associations of industry.
- On the basis of the inventory, propose possible solutions to make the e-government portals more findable, user-friendly and up-to-date .

Fighting against social fraud and social dumping:
Following up on the conclusions of the Benelux Summit of February 2014, the Benelux countries are striving to:

- Guarantee fair competition amongst companies and continue the fight against social dumping.
- Continue cooperation in fighting cross-border bogus employment schemes, fraudulent employment agencies and various forms of benefit fraud.
- Act jointly within the framework of EU discussions.

Expanding regional energy cooperation:
The Benelux countries strive to:

- Reinforce the market integration between the Benelux countries, Germany, France, Austria and Switzerland by supporting and monitoring the market coupling between these countries.
- Intensify the collaboration in regional initiatives (Pentalateral Energy Forum, Gas Platform and the North Sea Countries' Offshore Grid Initiative).
- Share existing knowledge through the Benelux Expertise Network.

Concerning logistics, infrastructure and innovation: Keeping in mind the importance of logistics for their economies, the three countries will build on their successful cooperation. Three Trans-European Networks Transport corridors traverse the Benelux. Government infrastructure programming within the Benelux and the development of TEN-T are becoming increasingly linked. The Benelux countries strive to:

- Explore how Intelligent Transport Systems can be used on other cross border freight transport routes as an improvement to the connection between economic centres (Antwerp, Brussels, Liège, Luxembourg, Rotterdam), following the example set by the Intelligent Transport System (ITS) cooperative corridor between Rotterdam, Frankfurt and Vienna
- Provide common support to cross-border projects and projects of common interest within the framework of Community financial instruments.
- Facilitate national or regional schemes and pilot projects for innovative and green road transport, so that cross border movements between those areas become possible.
- Launch pilot projects for paperless customs transit in inland navigation and road transport.

Taking into consideration that some of these measures are also introduced in the Benelux Annual Plan 2015, the Prime Ministers request the Secretariat general of the Benelux Union to play a role in the coordination of the implementation of these measures and report back to the Benelux Committee of Ministers.

Further details on the implementation of the above-mentioned measures are listed in the annex to this declaration.

Done at Brussels, 29 of April 2015

The Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Belgium	The Prime Minister of the Grand Duchy of Luxemburg	The Prime Minister of the Kingdom of the Netherlands